

Training on core skills still crucial in crisis

By **Mary MacDonald** - May 29, 2020 3:04 am



CLASSES IN SESSION: Stacy Sadlier, human resources director at Seven Stars Bakery LLC, says when the bakery was forced to lay off many of its workers during the shutdown, some employees lost access to English-learning courses. They have now resumed in a distance-learning format. The bakery hopes to recall its workers by the end of June. / PBN PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

While many workforce-development initiatives in [Rhode Island](#) are aimed at training people in highly skilled labor, such as pipefitting and computer-assisted manufacturing, others seek to teach students more-basic knowledge.

For people learning English, this includes how to answer a phone call at a bakery in a professional way, or how to answer a hotel customer's question about where a conference is taking place.

The [Rhode Island Core Skills Partnership](#), which receives state funding, provides English and literacy instruction for adults learning English as a second language, or instruction needed to earn a General Education Development diploma for people who didn't finish high school.

The training courses are crucial, as in many cases participants can use them as a pathway to career advancement, according to those in workforce development.

So when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and businesses shut down in March, the [Core Skills Partnership](#) and other adult-education agencies were scurrying to keep their programs running even though many participants had been laid off or furloughed and workplaces had been closed.

After a delay of a few weeks, adult-education programs and most of the participants were able to resume training courses in a distance-learning format with the help of businesses that were still shell-shocked about the shutdown and scrambling to survive.

'They're so engaged in the class.'

STACEY SADLIER, *Seven Stars Bakery LLC human resources director*

"It was a little bit of gentle persistence," said Kathy Gray, the employer liaison for RI [Core Skills Partnership](#).

One group were employees of Providence-based Seven Stars Bakery LLC, which has wholesale operations and three retail locations. There are also groups of [Rhode Island](#) hospitality workers taking classes organized by their union, Unite Here Local 26.

The hospitality workers, including housekeepers and lobby attendants at several Providence hotels, are now continuing their classes online through video conferencing.

Student Carlos Moscoso, whose first language is Spanish, said he was thankful to be able to continue his English instruction, even though he had been laid off in March at the [Omni Providence Hotel](#) and the [R.I. Convention Center](#), where he has worked for almost 24 years.

In his jobs, he often encountered guests who asked him questions, which he sometimes struggled to understand.

"The customers ask many questions," he said. The lessons, he said, will help him understand what they are saying, and help him be understood as well. "It helps with my pronunciation," he said.

Unite Here arranged with the [Rhode Island](#) Institute for Labor Studies and Research to provide the instruction about a year ago in collaboration with the [Core Skills Partnership](#), said Jonah Zinn, a union spokesman.

At Seven Stars Bakery, a small class of English learners reconvened when their English classes moved from in-person at the bakery headquarters after their shifts to online using smartphones.

The bakery business, which has three locations, had to lay off most of its workers when the businesses were closed to the public in mid-March, said human resources director Stacey Sadlier.

The English classes, which were taught by Yexcica Cappas Santiago, an English as a second language instructor from [The Genesis Center](#), had to be scuttled as well. But within two weeks, the [Core Skills Partnership](#) had the program running online.

Gray said she took a cue from what the elementary and secondary schools were doing. "All of the adult-education agencies jumped on that," she said.

It has not been without flaws. Some of the students lack digital literacy or access to the internet or a smartphone. Nevertheless, seven of the 10 workers who had been enrolled in the classes at Seven Stars Bakery have logged on.

They had missed seeing each other and their instructor, said Sadlier.

Until the pandemic arrived, Seven Stars had been paying its workers to attend the first hour of the 90-minute lessons. The instructor was paid by the state grant through the [Core Skills Partnership](#).

That incentive, as well as a \$100 bonus for completing the course, had helped to ensure attendance at the twice-weekly sessions.

In their class, the bakery employees learned how to describe their jobs to other students, how to answer the phone professionally if a manager was absent, how to receive a delivery at the backdoor without assistance.

But after the layoffs, when the bakeries suddenly closed, the business didn't have the money to pay the laid-off employees to take the classes. But most of them still wanted to learn.

"They're so engaged in the class," Sadlier said. "I think it was a disappointment that that was something that [they thought] was going to go away."

The bakery started to reopen recently. About 10% of the Seven Stars workforce is back on the job. And the business owners hope to have the remainder in place by the end of June.

Basic English instruction involves the vocabulary of the workplace. In this case, the words and phrases used in a kitchen. The program schedule was customized for Seven Stars as well.

The employees, who speak a number of languages, including French, Portuguese and Spanish, are valued, Sadlier said.

But with a mix of language fluency, the communication in the bakeries sometimes was a struggle.

"We do our best," Sadlier said. "We always did our best to translate. Trying to make English the common language in the workplace is really what we were working toward."

Mary MacDonald is a PBN staff writer. Contact her at Macdonald@PBN.com.



Want to share this story? [Click Here](#) to purchase a link that allows anyone to read it on any device whether or not they are a subscriber.
